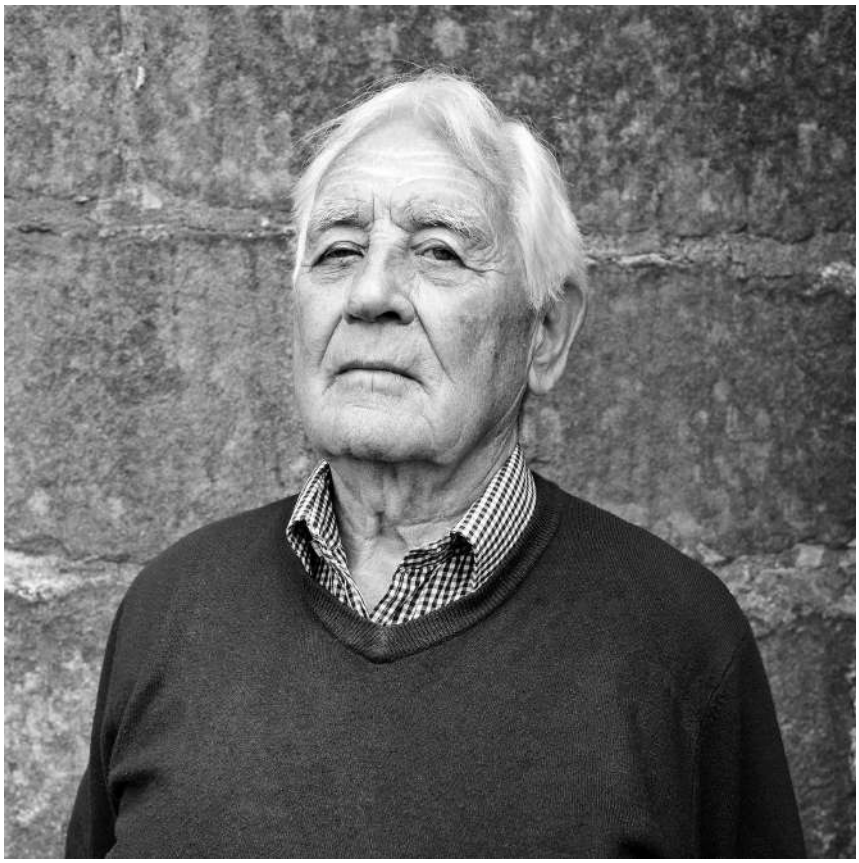
Keith Howden

Language For Stone

LYRIC BOOK



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Language For Stone

PREFACE

This collection of six compositions by Keith Howden is published in parallel with the album "Language For Stone" [AR R6], of which it is an important addition.

In 2019 Archaeological Records invited composer Matt Howden to participate in an expedition to search for and sample the sound (voices) of English musical stones. Matt, in turn, invited the poet Keith Howden, his father, to write some songs: Keith is familiar with Skiddaw, where he has often walked, and a great lover of the landscapes that those same rocks sculpted. Following Peter Crosthwaite's discoveries, we located the outcropping of the sound stones on Mount Skiddaw and from that recording session we acquired the sound material to develop the musical and poetic project.
From stone to man and from man to stone, in an ancient artistic double bind.

The lyrics that Keith Howden wrote between 2019 and 2020, published here in their first version, were the main inspiration for Matt's creative process.
The variations compared to their recorded version are minimal, but the presence of a song whose title is different from its final version stands out: *Lud's Church*, which would later become *Stone*.

Writing and remembering the production of this album, so significant for all those involved, I cannot help but underline how the poetics of Keith Howden, so fiercely localist but equally timeless, whose use of the archetypes of English culture manages to produce an evocative effect that makes his verses accessible everywhere, and above all whose writing is naturally endowed with a rare strength, is the most appropriate to restore the dramatic beauty of the land that we experienced.

AR

A Language for stones

Somewhyle with wormez he werrez and with wolves als,
Somewhyle with wodwos that woned in the knarrez.

This was a language for rough land.
Within its structures move the residues
of a more brutal world. An older rhetoric
asserts the echo rememberings
of a cruel supernatural.
Hard vowels trap the rituals of blows,
harsh consonants haunt with resonances
of the knapper's hand. Within its rhythms
exist the gestures of the primitive,
asserting fen and fell. Alliteration hauls
a syntax more of moor than meadow,
a grammar of rough transits outside the silk
civilities of assonance and rhyme.
The innate parables of its movement
acknowledge codes and hierarchies
of older and unforgiving gods.

It makes a direct stab into the senses,
a word's sword leaving the page,
its onomatopoeic and alliterative assault
enclosing felt experience
in the first rituals of its making.
This language fights. Is a *knarre* sharper,
more threatening, harder than rock?

It carries an attachment to the thing
more energetic than aimless naming,
where sound and function are moulded,
propelled into the senses' world.
Faith moves in metaphors of rock:
such transits cannot exist in *knarrez.*

Before

Before speech
were the harmonies
of constellations, the impulse
swinging the galaxy's spheres.

Before speech
were the oratorios
of magma, the sun's hymn,
the moon's choreography.

Before speech
were the continents' rhythms.
the sea's orchestration
of geology's anthems.

Before speech
was the music of stone,
the constrained instruments
of a symphonic underground.

Before speech
was stone's imprisonment
of earth's locked descants,
its psalms waiting release.

Before speech
were the mineral adjustments,
the counterpoint of ores,
the songs of the knapper's hand.

A music for stones

Stone seeks its music. Manacled
in mortar, imprisoned in walls,
knows the direction of its longing:

remembering earth's orchestras,
the innate symphonies of land,
rings intuitive and stays

responsive to the hidden anthems
of its molten forming, to the psalm
continuity of its structures:

embodies the wet intricacies
and soft diameters of grass, the juice
hypotenuses of water's leach.

Within its caliper are the wind's hymns,
the latent animus and flex
of millennial seasons. Strike

and hear through geological time
the reverberations and assonances
of mildew's stellar mechanics,
of the seed's muscle, of the root's
slow hunger, rain's lisping appetites.

Wodwo

Am Wodwo
moor manifest mine
watch woman-wound
birthborn bring song suckles
new-made nipple nuzzle

Am Wodwo
moor mystical mine
stone strike spark start
flint-fire flame finds
flesh-feast forming

Am Wodwo
moor mythical mine
moon magnet mystery
air-arch ascending
lifts light loop

Am Wodwo
moor magical mine
rain rollrock rhythm
hare hunt heather haunt
fruit flower fertile find

Am Wodwo
moor miracle mine
sunswelter seedswell

psalm-send succour seek
gods gifting gain

Am Wodwo
moor meat-midas mine
world winter withering
embers eat-empty
land lifelust lost

Lud’s Church

I am the Word. I am
magma’s muscle. Earth’s retch
my midwife, my sibling
water’s swill. Weather
my nurture, my nature stone.
Within my structures burn
oracle and omphalos,
Alpha and Omega. I am
knowledge before words’ knowing.
My covenant is stone.
Pillars of stone announce
my imminence and
whatever god grows
immanent in me I celebrate
in stone/. I am the Word.
The Word is stone.

Eolith

Am dawnstone.
earth engined.
Am magma's muscle made.
Millennia molten,
mystery moulded,
rock roost riven,
time tanged,
gorge gouged,
strata scar.

Am dawnstone.
man machine.
Am knuckleduster knapped.
Hand hammer history,
percussion prised,
axe anthem,
skinscrape,
mind moulded,
flint flake.

Am dawnstone,
mother music.
Am sound strike sensual.
Rhythm's ritual rousing,
seed surplus seeking,
dance drum,
limbs lithe lift,
bounty beseech,

psalm sending

Am dawnstone,
enigma egg.
Am dragonseed dropped.
Conundrum question carved,
Garden genesis garbled,
axe anthem,
age acrostic,
time tangle,
puzzle pebble.

AFTERWORD

Not bloody Gawain

'Forget Gawain,' he said, 'that pious
prosody. It was the god-lot squealing
for a piece of my altar. *No go.*
I keep my bucking feasts. My verse
parses outside their seasons' hymns.
I fire the green fuse yearly igniting
sap's deep dynamite. *Forget Gawain,*
that academic envoy. The psalm-suckers
sang to usurp my rituals, to geld
my lust inside their castrate parables.
No go. Never a fair exchange. I don't
dance monotheism and my cadences
won't fit their rhythm. I am the enigma
impelling the tree to leaf. *Forget Gawain,*
that hallelujah heresy. The anthem-boys
fancied my anarchies tamed. *No go.*
No frozen orisons, no sterile litanies.
I am the sun's missionary. I blaze
barley's ferment, the zeppelin swell
ballooning the seed, the underground
appetite of roots. *Forget Gawain.'*

....and so to the middle English poem of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. It's a rather odd, perhaps biased title, since the green man is actually anything but knightly. His strength is

in not being so. Like Jack Cade, he has vigour and roots in riotous nature: like Cade, when committed to compete with order, he is unusual, unruly, and has his feet dance in the world of reality more than chivalry.
Perhaps, from the evidence above, I start by believing that Gawain is on a loser from the beginning of his adventures. At best. I think, he can aim only for a draw or the chance of no real resolution.

When I think of the poem's vigorous language, in particular as it occurs and is recorded in its alliterative and onomatopoeic recognition of the rough journey through natural landscape that Gawain must make, I come half way to the conclusion that the language representing his relatively civilised chivalry can have little chance when it needs to compete with the sinewy movement of the language representing the domain of his future adversary. That vigorous transit embedded in language is muscular and explains the nature of the opposition ahead while the sympathetic energy in its expression of disorder hardly bodes well for Gawain's result. I tend to know on which side I would be placing my bets.
Gawain's language structure is pallid against that defining and invigorating tone forcing the Green Man into our attention. Without him, the poem itself is considerably more pallid, seeming to demonstrate in the opposition it provokes that it is itself is part of the argument. Emotionally and perhaps intellectually, I opt for the language that carries its understanding of the nature of the unfair competition: it wears a force like that of Cade, driving the contest of ceremony versus anarchy to its inevitable conclusion while pretending in its conclusions that some sort of draw has been achieved. If finally, the author's result is muted, thinly won and insecure, I think we should guess why. Altogether it's a quite interesting to recognise that the language demonstrates the real winner while the story opts for a milder conclusion.

As a last thought, it's worth mentioning what a fine poetic language the Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse form is. It constructs an extraordinary aptness and muscularity here, perfectly adapted to the sounds and structures of English, native to its noises and separations. In some ways, it's a pity that we contrived to leave it behind for forms that are less comfortably acquainted. Sometimes I feel that we lost a language closely tied in its rhythmic structures and its onomatopoeic recognition of simpler realities to gain one that skids the surface far more intellectually and seems to have grown to be possibly the most subtle noise-communication instrument available to us. We lost and we gained in that evolution.

Keith Howden, September 2025

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